

WHEN CONVENTIONAL WISDOM MEETS RESEARCH: THE MYTH OF IMPLIED THIRD-PARTY ENDORSEMENT

Many pr practitioners are reluctant to use research because they have mastered the production of a communication product & do not want to question whether it really has any value in meeting a client organization's goals. If the client asks for research, the practitioner typically does evaluation research to support the use of the product. When the client asks for a logical explanation of why the product is useful, the practitioner typically produces a theory (yes, every practitioner has a theory behind everything he or she does) that rationalizes the use of the product. Logical consistency is the first test of any explanation of what we do. Many times, the explanation seems obvious. Yet, **logical thinking & systematic gathering of evidence frequently show that conventional wisdom is not so obvious as we might have thought.**

Academic pr researchers often question conventional wisdom because they have fewer vested interests in selling communication products. Academicians often begin a program of research by testing cherished assumptions of practitioners. When research shows that these assumptions cannot be supported, the scholarly researcher moves forward to develop a better theory of how communication practices actually work.

Our case-in-point in this supplement is the conventional wisdom that there is an "implied third-party endorsement" when the media cover a product or organization. Marketing communication specialists use this theory the most, but it is popular with other practitioners who sell media placements as a pr product. Kirk Hallahan, a pr researcher at Colorado State University, has written that this concept has been popular for at least half a century. Why? Because it provides a seemingly simple & unquestionable explanation of why marketers & organizations should strive for media coverage – still the most common product sold by pr people.

The idea of third-party endorsement appears regularly in the marketing communication literature & in new-business presentations of pr firms. It also has worked its way into advertising equivalency formulas for calculating the value of publicity. In these formulas, one calculates how much the space gained in the media would cost if it were purchased as advertising. Then that value is multiplied by a factor such as 3, 5, or 7 to reflect the greater credibility of news coverage over advertising.

PR professionals believe news coverage has greater credibility than advertising because readers or viewers assume journalists have endorsed the product or organization by choosing to write about it & because readers believe journalists are more objective than advertisers.

This is about as far as most pr theories of implied third-party endorsement go.

There is one missing step, however: the effect of the endorsement. The assumed greater credibility of the media would be valuable only if it had a greater effect on readers or viewers than an advertisement. For example, publicity might have greater value than advertising if receivers of media messages remember the message more often, develop more favorable attitudes, or behave in a way desired by the client.

Academic researchers have tested three components of this popular theory of pr: 1) that news coverage is more credible than advertising; 2) that people believe journalists endorse products, people, or organizations in the news; 3) that news coverage is more effective than advertising. Unfortunately for conventional wisdom, there is little research evidence to support any parts of the theory.

Differences between the two formats for messages (advertising & news stories) can be tested most easily with a laboratory experiment. Then, the researcher can control for factors other than the format of the message that might affect how people perceive the message & are affected by it.

In most experimental studies of third-party endorsement, the participants have been college students; but some studies have used non-students & did not find differences. Let's look, then, at the evidence for the three parts of the theory of third-party endorsement.

CREDIBILITY

The two most active pr researchers studying third-party endorsement have been Hallahan & Glen Cameron of the University of Missouri. Both researchers conducted thorough reviews of previous research before conducting their own original research.¹

¹ These can be found in G. T. Cameron, "Does Publicity Outperform Advertising? An Experimental Test of the Third-Party Endorsement," *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 6, 1994, pp. 185-207; K. Hallahan, "Product Publicity: An Orphan of Marketing Research," in E. Thorson & J. Moore (Eds.), *Integrated Communication: The Search for Synergy in Communication Voices*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publish-

In addressing the question of whether people perceive news coverage as more credible than advertising, both Cameron & Hallahan studied the large body of literature on source credibility. Most research on credibility asks participants in an experiment to rate different sources of information on several dimensions of credibility, such as trustworthiness, expertise, or informativeness. Both Cameron & Hallahan found relatively little research comparing the credibility of news & advertising. The studies they did find showed no consistent advantage for news over advertising.

For example, Cameron & Hallahan cited a study conducted at the University of Georgia on the credibility of advocacy advertising & news.² Participants in the study received identical information on the issue of whether Congress should ban saccharin because it causes cancer. For half of the participants, the story was labeled as an advertisement & for half as a news story. For half, also, the story was attributed to the American Cancer Society & for the other half to the Pepsi Cola Company.

The participants rated the information as more credible on several indices of credibility when it was labeled as news & when it was attributed to the Cancer Society rather than Pepsi. However, when the researchers looked for interactions between these two main variables, they found no clear advantage for news. News was more credible when the information came from the Cancer Society but not when it came from Pepsi, a commercial source with a vested interest in the issue.

Likewise, news was seen as more credible only when participants did not think the issue was very important (what researchers call low involvement). When the issue was important (highly involving), there was no difference in

ers, 1996, pp. 305-330; & K. Hallahan, "No, Virginia It's Not True What They Say About Publicity's 'Implied Third-Party Endorsement' Effect," *Public Relations Review*, 25, 1999, pp. 331-350.

² C. T. Salmon, L. N. Reid, J. Pokrywczynski, & R. W. Willett, "The Effectiveness of Advocacy Advertising Relative to News Coverage," *Communication Research*, 12, 1985, pp. 546-567.

credibility because people think much more actively about what they are reading when they are more involved – regardless of whether it is in a news or advertising format.

Hallahan asked 329 participants to compare “news in general” & “advertising in general” on eight statements measuring credibility & usefulness. The participants rated news more highly on all eight statements, especially those measuring credibility. However, he also asked the participants to respond to 11 statements describing “media & advertising practices.” They agreed with some items supporting the idea of third-party endorsement, such as believing that news is written differently than advertising, that they are more confident that the media are not trying to sell them something, & that they know someone is trying to sell them something in an ad.

At the same time, the participants expressed skepticism about the news media. They agreed that media often speak for special interests & that the media are beholden to other organizations in society. They disagreed that “news reporters & editors are more knowledgeable about products & services than advertising people.” They also agreed slightly that they would prefer to get product information in ads &, more strongly, that “ads are a more reliable source of product information than news.”

In Hallahan’s words, the research comparing the credibility of news & advertising can be summarized as, “If news is more credible than advertising, the evidence is yet to be substantiated.” People know that advertisers are trying to sell them something, but they also believe that they can get good product information from ads. At the same time, people distrust the media & are not willing to accept product information from them without questioning it – especially when the product or issue is involving, or important, to them.

DO PEOPLE BELIEVE JOURNALISTS ENDORSE PRODUCTS?

Theoretically, the idea that people believe editors & reporters endorse a product, position, or organization when they write about it is a

key part of the logic underlying the supposed superiority of news coverage over advertising. Hallahan asked his participants if they agreed that “a positive story about a product or service is essentially a recommendation to purchase it” & “when I read a news story, I feel confident that the reporter has researched the story fully.” The means were slightly above the midpoint on the scale, which Hallahan interpreted as luke-warm support for the idea of third-party endorsement.

Rather, Hallahan proposed that a better explanation of any advantage of media coverage over advertising is that people have a negative bias toward advertising. He also proposed that people resist any attempts to persuade them, & advertising clearly is intended to persuade more than is news coverage.

So much for the conventional theory underlying third-party endorsement. In Hallahan’s words, “The time has come for practitioners to abandon implied third-party endorsement claims. Although the idea appears to be supported by people’s predisposition to favor news over advertising, this advantage can be explained as much by people’s dislike of advertising, & by their resistance to persuasion attempts, as by any characteristic of news.”

EFFECTS OF NEWS & ADVERTISING

The last leg of the three-sided stool supporting the idea that news coverage is more effective than advertising is the claim that news has greater effects on memory, attitudes, & behavior. Although the stool probably cannot stand now that only one leg remains, that leg too is not well connected to the stool.

Cameron set up an experiment in which participants read a 2-page booklet that included a story about a Mazda car. For half the participants, the story was labeled as an ad. For half, there was no label. He then tested how much they remembered the information.

Participants remembered slightly more information when the story was not labeled as an ad, & the effect remained after two weeks – when the subjects could be expected to have forgotten the source of the information. How-

ever, further analysis showed that only “the more discerning readers” (those who remembered seeing the label) remembered more information from the news story.

Cameron concluded, “some evidence exists to support the claim of the third-party endorsement for immediate & delayed memory of a message. However, in practical terms, the effect is not profound & is restricted only to the more discerning reader.”

Hallahan reviewed 11 studies comparing the effects of news & advertising on memory, attitudes, & behavioral intent. Only two provided support for greater effectiveness of news, & one of those was this study by Cameron. In three of the studies, greater effectiveness of news was confounded by experimental problems. The other studies found **qualified** support for news coverage.

Qualified support means that news was more effective only under certain conditions. These qualified conditions included involvement (which we already have discussed), the featured spokesperson, prior attitude toward the product, knowledge of the product, & quality of the argument. Hallahan concluded, “The evidence suggests news does *not* uniformly outperform advertising.”

Hallahan illustrated the importance of two of these qualifying conditions – quality of the argument & involvement – in a recent experiment.³ Three hundred twenty nine participants read articles & ads they were told were being pretested for a new magazine. Exactly the same information was presented as ads & news. Half of the material was presented with a strong argument & half with a “plausible but less compelling claim.” The involvement of each subject was measured for each of the products. A number of effects were measured, including recall, thoughts about the product, believability, attitude, & intent to purchase.

Hallahan found that news coverage was more effective than advertising only when the

argument was weak. Advertisers were able to overcome the bias toward advertising by presenting strong arguments. Likewise, when participants perceived the product to be important, they spent less time processing information in news stories than in advertising because they seemed to believe it was less necessary to process news thoroughly than advertising.

Hallahan concluded that people are quite discerning when they read ads but more likely to believe a weak argument in the news. Marketers, therefore, can overcome bias toward advertising by presenting strong arguments.

DON'T ASSUME ANYTHING: DO RESEARCH OR USE RESEARCH

To most practitioners, the idea of an implied third-party endorsement is a no-brainer. Research, however, shows that news has no inherent superiority over advertising. Under some conditions, news coverage will be more effective. Under other conditions, advertising might be more effective. Under most conditions, you might want to combine the two.

But let's be even more provocative. Why should we assume that news coverage & advertising are the only – or the best – means of communicating with consumers & other publics? Theories of relationship marketing suggest that consumers might prefer to get information from other people, personally from a company representative, or from the Internet.

Jim Grunig's senior seminar at the University of Maryland just completed research asking people where they prefer to get information about caring for a chronically ill person. The media were way down the list. People preferred getting information from other people, a doctor, or a caregiving organization.

Don't assume that your favorite communication product is effective. Conduct original research to identify publics & to determine how to communicate with them. Also read secondary research. A lot of academic research is available & could substitute for original research.

³ K. Hallahan, “Content Class as a Contextual Cue in the Cognitive Processing of Publicity Versus Advertising,” *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 11, 1999, pp. 293-320.